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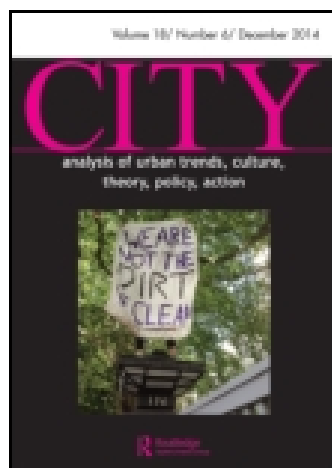
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# The economic crisis as opportunity

## How austerity generates new strategies and solidarities for negotiating Roma access to housing in Rome

Gaja Maestri

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*The paper investigates how the economic crisis and austerity politics affect the strategies of pro-Roma non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and movements that fight for Roma access to housing in Rome. In the last 20 years, the main social housing policy for the Roma adopted by the City of Rome consisted of the so-called ‘equipped villages’, that is, equipped areas with Portakabins and basic facilities. Designed as a temporary housing solution to accommodate the Roma population living in the slums of the Italian capital, these villages nonetheless persist, hosting an increasing number of Roma evicted from informal settlements. As a result, these villages are now harshly criticised for being highly segregating, for being overcrowded with worsening sanitary conditions and for not enabling integration. Furthermore, the recent economic recession and austerity politics are putting a strain on Roma integration policies. The increase of social tensions and unrest, the rise of populist parties and of anti-immigration (and anti-Roma) attitudes do not facilitate the inclusion of the Roma minority, in Italy as in other European countries. What effects are these dynamics having on the capacity of pro-Roma associations arguing against the segregation of the equipped villages and for the development of alternative social housing for the Roma? Although it may seem that the crisis has mainly negative effects on the possibility of insisting on Roma integration, the pro-Roma NGOs and movements considered in this paper show how post-crisis austerity can be mobilised as a new resource for action. The paper focuses on two strategies using the crisis as a frame and base for contesting the segregation of the Roma: the first is to highlight the costs of segregation and the second is to mobilise a new form of solidarity based on the housing crisis.*

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**Key words:** slum clearance policies, access to housing, Roma and Travellers, economic crisis, austerity, pro-Roma advocacy groups, housing crisis, solidarity

### Introduction

Rome, 1994: when the local administration proposed the creation of equipped villages<sup>1</sup> to temporarily accommodate the Roma that were living in

the slums of the city, few would have probably imagined that 20 years later these villages would have become the new problem to be solved. This paper tells the story of how a ‘solution’ became a new ‘problem’, and how difficult it is to suggest alternatives

in times of economic crisis. The old problem was addressing the relocation of the Roma slum population and their housing, social and economic integration. The solution adopted at that time consisted of providing equipped areas with Portakabins and basic facilities where the Roma could be (possibly) temporarily relocated. The new problem that developed in the last 20 years is that these equipped areas actually remained in place, the population that live there increased, the sanitary conditions worsened and they became highly segregated spaces far from other residential areas, with few people succeeding in finding alternative accommodation either in public housing or the private housing market. In the last decade, several pro-Roma non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have started denouncing the situation of these equipped villages and insisting on finding alternative solutions. However, the criminalisation of the Roma in the last two decades intensified controlling and rejection policies, such as evictions, repatriations and police patrolling of Romani settlements. Furthermore, the last economic crisis, with the exacerbation of social tensions, does not facilitate the proposal of integration policies for the Roma. How, then, are pro-Roma NGOs and social movements coping with the economic and social effects of the crisis?

Based on a series of interviews conducted with members of pro-Roma advocacy groups in Rome between September and December 2013, the paper focuses on how NGOs and movements frame their demands, and on what basis and discourses they justify the call for a dismantling of the system of Roma equipped villages. More precisely, I aim to interrogate how such framing changes in a time of economic crisis and austerity politics. The first section examines the Roma who are experiencing severe housing deprivation and interrogates the dynamics of their marginalisation. In the second section I illustrate the emergence and development of the Roma housing policy of equipped villages in the last 20 years and

how they came to constitute a new policy problem and a political issue as well. The third section focuses on how the crisis is affecting the capacity of adopting alternative Roma housing policies and illustrates the main obstacles that pro-Roma NGOs and movements face. The fourth discusses two sets of strategies developed by advocacy groups to challenge the exclusionary effects of the crisis and to pursue the goal of dismantling the equipped villages. This section aims to show that the economic crisis does not necessarily hinder the fight for Roma access to housing, but it can in fact generate new frames of contestation and forms of mobilisation. In the conclusion I summarise the main effects of the crisis on the possibility of changing current Roma housing policies and I illustrate the main variables that can account for these different effects.

### The Roma and the ethnicisation of poverty

The most accredited theory on the origin of the Roma people contends that they arrived in Europe from India, either in the 14th century (Hancock 1987; Liégeois 1994) or around the 10th–11th century (Hancock 2010), and that since the 16th century they started limiting their movement becoming almost sedentary (Liégeois 1994). Today, in Italy there are mainly two groups, Roma and Sinti (Sigona 2007). Although there are no official figures on the Roma in Italy, the National Office Against Racial Discrimination (UNAR) estimates that there are about 170,000–180,000 Roma on the Italian territory (UNAR 2012). Most of the Roma and Sinti in Italy are Italian citizens, while about 40% are foreigners, mainly coming from the Balkan region, arriving in Italy during different migratory waves, that is, the early 21st century, 1960s and 1970s, and Balkan and Kosovo wars. In the last decade there has been an increase of Eastern European Roma, mainly from Romania and Bulgaria. Roma migrants who arrived from

former Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s were relatively well integrated into the labour market with jobs in the agricultural sector, or traditional professions such as horse farming and craftsmanship (UNAR 2012). On the contrary, Roma of more recent migration flows tend to live in poor and marginalised contexts in urban areas, often in slums, doing mainly low-skilled and informal jobs. Roma migration to Western Europe has been motivated by different reasons, such as work, and fleeing wars and persecutions (Legros and Vitale 2011). But who exactly are the persons that go under the name of Roma people and that history books, scholars and policymakers refer to?

It is always difficult to provide an exhaustive definition of a social group and it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full analysis of the definitions of who the Roma are and the way these definitions changed in history. What I am more interested in is to illustrate the different dimensions of inequality characterising the situation of extremely poor people regarded as Roma by the policy community. Most of the time Roma-related policies actually target families or individuals living in extremely deprived conditions, often in urban slums, that either speak the Romani language or that are regarded by the majoritarian population as gypsies. For instance, the European Union (EU) Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies does not refer to middle-class Roma, neither does the Decade of Roma Inclusion programme endorsed by the Open Society Foundation (OSF). The same applies to the Nomads Emergency Decree adopted in Italy in 2008 and to the National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Communities (UNAR 2012). This class-based definition is also implicitly reinforced by governing practices. For instance, most of the figures on the Roma population refer to the population living in slums. Yet, the Roma are still defined in ethnic terms, the Council of Europe

(COE), for instance, considers them as the 'true European minority' (Vermeersch 2012, 1204) and, as of 5 June 2013, the OSF website includes the *Rromanipé*, that is, the Romani worldview, among the characteristics of Romani culture.

In order to explain why the Roma are defined in ethnic terms, I consider ethnicity from a constructivist perspective, which focuses not on the intrinsic characteristics of an ethnic group (such as customs or traditions) but on its mutable and permeable boundaries (Brubaker 2004; Wimmer 2008). This perspective comes from Barth's (1969) theory of ethnicity as social construction defined by the field of interaction between members and strangers rather than by blood ties or essential features as suggested by a primordialist perspective (Geertz 1996). Ethnicity is therefore about boundary-making; it is the outcome of a social process and its meaning and salience might change over time. Wimmer (2008) suggests focusing on the making of ethnic groups rather than trying to provide a definition of what ethnicity as a concept is. From this point of view, Roma ethnicity can be seen as the product of a particular boundary-making process, based on their stigmatisation, criminalisation and rejection, which makes them a European pariah, as also argued by Barth (1969). Thus, Roma ethnic identity is the way their socio-economic position is framed: from former slaves to modern scroungers, the Roma have always been at the margins of economic systems and for this reason rejected and stigmatised.

The Roma represented the excluded from different economic modes of production. As argued by Barth (1969), the pariah groups are excluded and stigmatised yet often useful in some practical way, so their position of excluded represents at the same time a way of being included. They used to be slaves in Eastern Europe until the abolition of slavery in the 1860s (Hancock 1987). Okely (1983) argues that, from the end of Feudalism, the Roma were categories that refused

to be proletarianised, that is, to commodify their workforce. Vagabonds, tinkers and bohemians were included by Marx in the category of the lumpenproletariat, that is, those that are below the working class (Marx [1852] 2005). While under the Soviet Union they were forced to work in factories (Dunajeva 2012), their exclusion from the labour market exacerbated in the last 20 years and Roma unemployment is becoming an issue increasingly gaining the attention of institutions such as the EU and the World Bank that endorse activation projects (mainly in Central and Eastern Europe) (Van Baar 2011). The idea that the Roma are economically 'good-for-nothing' in neo-liberal economies is present in Western Europe too, where there are often policies of rejection of these groups, such as repatriations and evictions (Windels et al. 2014). The Roma, different from other migrants, are not seen as a potential employable workforce but are seen as a burden on welfare and a threat to public order. However, despite seen as useless therefore excluded, they are often included in political discourses as scapegoat for problems such the welfare crisis or unemployment (Fassin 2010). Moreover, this feeling has been worsened by the post-austerity 'strivers versus scroungers' rhetoric (Fekete 2014, 61). The Roma became the symbol of those who do not work and who live on the shoulders of taxpayers. These aspects come to be framed as a Roma culture and lifestyle choice, and this hinders public awareness of the aforementioned historical, political and economic factors that determined such marginalisations. Thus, the economic deprivation of the Roma is a product of both historical and contemporary socio-political-economic conditions, yet it is often understood in ethnic terms, that is, as a shared cultural characteristic (Hutchinson and Smith 1996) and as part of their alleged deviant culture. The ethnicisation of their marginality creates obstacles in their access to the labour market, education, health and, as I illustrate in the next section, access to housing.

### The persistence of Roma housing exclusion in Rome

Almost one-third of the Roma and Sinti population in Italy experience severe housing deprivation living in either regular, tolerated or informal settlements (Sigona 2007). The 2008 census in the cities of Rome, Naples and Milan reported 12,346 Roma living in either Roma informal or regular settlements but this is probably an underestimate as in 2012 the City of Rome counted 11,021 Roma living in settlements (Dalla Zuanna 2013). Currently, the City of Rome has 19 official Roma-only villages, 8 of which are fully equipped with Portakabins and basic facilities (equipped villages), while the remaining 11 (tolerated camps), despite being officially acknowledged, are not directly run by the City of Rome. As of 2012, official figures from the City of Rome show about 4500 Roma living in equipped villages and the rest (6282) in either tolerated or informal settlements with often lack of basic facilities, such as access to drinking water or electricity. These figures do not include four Roma reception centres that host only Romani people, for a total of 900 residents.

In 1995, the former centre-left mayor of Rome, Francesco Rutelli (1994–99, 1999–2004), presented the first Nomad Plan establishing the dismantling of Romani slums and the creation of a special housing programme for the Romani slum population, consisting of 10 equipped villages designed to provide better sanitary standards, with a capacity of 1480 people (against a total population of 5467 people living in informal slums and halting sites of the city). Although a policy can be hardly reduced to a single origin or goal, the policy of equipped villages responded mainly to two aims: on the one hand slum clearance and on the other a process of social integration through housing. The double character of this policy mirrors the ambivalent attitude towards the Roma minority, seen as both threatening and vulnerable. The Roma alleged cultural



nomadism constitutes a 'non-conforming territoriality' (Kofman 1995, 130) arousing conflicting feelings, between hospitality and hostility. For instance, the local ordinance 80/1996 that establishes the creation of equipped villages (Comune di Roma 1996) refers to the Lazio regional law for the protection of the Roma and their nomad culture adopted in 1985 and providing the creation of halting sites (Regione Lazio 1985).<sup>2</sup> During the 1980s, several Italian regions adopted laws for the protection of nomad culture with the support of pro-Roma religious associations, such as the Opera Nomadi,<sup>3</sup> that saw these laws as a way to integrate the Roma communities (Sigona 2002). However, from the time of their creation, equipped villages have also been characterised by increasing practices of control.

During late 1990s and early 2000s, the local political debate on Roma slums came to be increasingly framed in security terms rather than by a humanitarian approach, prominent in the early 1990s. The former centre-left mayor Walter Veltroni (2004–2008) increased the number of evictions and the implementation of Roma equipped villages on the periphery of the city (Stasolla 2012). In 2007, the City of Rome presented the First Security for Rome Pact providing the creation of four so-called 'solidarity villages' (with a capacity of 1000 residents each), and an increase of police surveillance in the informal settlements. Pro-Roma NGOs openly criticised the Roman administration for planning to confine the Roma on the periphery of the city and for repatriating many Roma EU citizens, and denounced the increasing use of hate speech, mainly against Romanian Roma. However, this security policy approach continued with the following centre-right mayor Gianni Alemanno (2008–13).

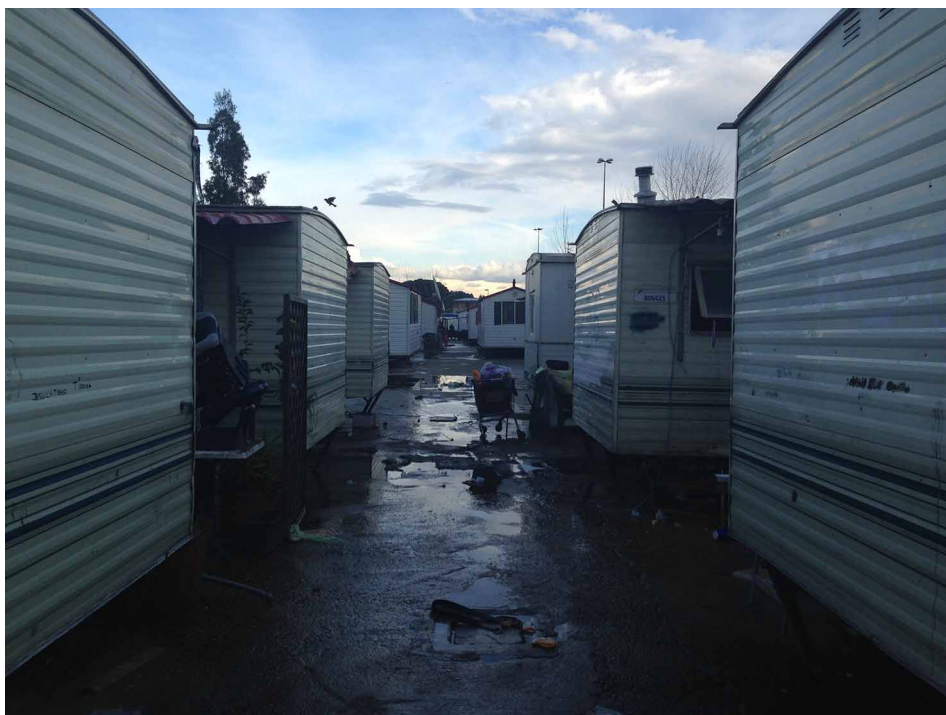
In 2008, the national government adopted the Nomad Emergency Decree (Consiglio dei Ministri 2008) claiming that the Roma informal settlements constituted a threat to public health, order and security. The prefects of the cities of Naples, Milan and

Rome were given extra powers to tackle the emergency situation, mainly through an increased control of equipped villages and facilitated repatriations and evictions. In 2009, Rome's mayor, Gianni Alemanno, presented a new Nomad Plan entailing the creation of five large equipped villages on the outer periphery of the city to house the Roma evicted from informal settlements in the city centre. Local, national and international pro-Roma advocacy groups condemned this emergency decree, arguing that it constituted ethnic discrimination and that it actually worsened the housing conditions of the Roma rather than addressing their integration.

The Nomads Emergency Decree was annulled in 2011, when the use of exceptional powers was deemed anti-constitutional given the lack of any actual emergency (Consiglio di Stato 2011; Corte Suprema di Cassazione 2013). The new administration of the City of Rome (elected in June 2013 and led by the centre-left mayor Ignazio Marino) committed to pursue the objectives identified in the National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Communities, part of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 (European Commission 2011). Yet, despite these apparent advances, current policies appear to continue to be in line with the former administrations (Associazione 21 Luglio 2014a) and the Marino administration has been called to face the failure of the policy of the equipped villages (Figure 1).

Many NGOs and movements denounce the fact that although the Roma equipped villages were created to integrate the Roma living in slums, they actually produced a segregating system where Roma are bound to remain indefinitely, living in situations that often present the same poor health and safety standards of previously evicted slums (Associazione 21 Luglio 2010). Furthermore, as shown by a report by Amnesty International (2013), the Roma living in equipped villages and informal settlements are practically denied access to public housing.





**Figure 1** The equipped village of Salone Street, one of the biggest in Rome and hosting 960 people (2012 census) (Photo: Reprinted with permission of Associazione 21 Luglio, Rome)

Indeed, they often result in them being not eligible because evictions from an abode neither rented nor owned do not count in the scoring system for the allocation of public housing. For these reasons NGOs in the last few years have increasingly insisted on dismantling the system of the Roma equipped villages and on developing alternative social housing policies, such as slum upgrade programmes, access to public housing and self-build projects. However, there are a series of factors that hamper the change of this long-running housing solution, among which is the 2007–2008 economic crisis.

### Economic crisis in Italy and Rome: the stalemate vis-à-vis Roma housing policies

Italy was hit by the 2007 global financial crisis and by the following sovereign debt and eurozone crises. In 2013, the Italian

GDP (gross domestic product) was still 7.5% lower than 2008 and the unemployment rate increased to 12.4% in 2011. In 2011, as a response to the crisis (and the pressure from the European Central Bank), the Italian government led by the new appointed Prime Minister, Mario Monti, adopted the Save Italy Decree, approved by Parliament in December of that year. Italian austerity measures included the reintroduction of a formerly repealed property tax, a rise in VAT, health spending cuts and an increase in the retirement age. Like in other countries where austerity was condemned for its unequal distributional effects (Blyth 2013), austerity measures have been harshly criticised in Italy (Krugman 2013).

Indeed, the burden of the crisis in Italy appears to disproportionately weigh on the poorer classes and the most vulnerable groups, such as younger people, the unemployed and those on low pensions (Matsaganis and Leventi 2014), as well as those

dependent on the industrial sector, usually with lower education or immigrants (Baldini 2014). Although the welfare state should balance the effects of economic crises, the 2007 financial crisis turned into a welfare crisis as well. In Italy, as in Greece, the Southern Model of a welfare state (as defined by Ferrera 1996) with a lack of social safety net became more vulnerable to cuts, producing increasing social polarisation between vulnerable and protected categories (Matsaganis 2012). Economic recessions, unemployment and times of crisis of welfare states can also be associated with the rise of far-right parties (Jackman and Volpert 1996; Norris 2005), xenophobic and anti-immigration attitudes (Huysmans 2006), and to political protests (Ponticelli and Voth 2011). The 2007 crisis is no exception, both with regard to the spur of urban unrest (Ginsburg, Jeffers, and Mooney 2012; Levitas 2012) and to the rise of populist parties (see, for instance, the rise of the Italian Five Stars Movement).

Furthermore, in the case of the Roma in the City of Rome, there are other aspects that might complicate the situation. The first is its public administration crisis whereby, because of a public debt of about 800 million euros, in April 2014 Parliament approved the Save Rome Decree that entailed a set of measures to restore the budget to balance, such as the anticipation of government transfers to the City of Rome and cuts to public expenditure. The second is that the City of Rome has already invested substantial public monies for the Roma equipped villages and Roma integration. As a matter of fact, from 2005 to 2011, the City of Rome spent almost 70 million euros on Roma housing policies and projects (Berenice et al. 2013). Despite many pro-Roma NGOs denouncing the way in which this public funding excludes and confines the Roma for the security of Italian citizens, this public expenditure not only enables the local administration to show that public money has already been spent on the Roma (however arguable these policies might be), it also constitutes

incomes and revenues for a set of actors that might oppose change, such as social cooperatives working in equipped villages. The third aspect regards social housing policies.<sup>4</sup> Italy has a limited public expenditure for housing policies (less than 0.5% of social expenditure) and low percentage of rented social housing (De Luca, Governa, and Lancione 2009), with only 5 social dwellings per 100 households, against an average of 18–19 social dwellings in other European countries (Tosi and Cremaschi 2001). Strain on the social housing sector is heavier in urban and metropolitan areas that are mainly affected by demographic growth (also due to migration), poverty and severe housing deprivation, a shortage of affordable housing and the deterioration of the housing stock in the city centres (Tosi and Cremaschi 2001). At the beginning of 2014, the Lazio Region adopted a new plan to address the housing crisis mainly in the City of Rome, with new regional funding transfers to Rome, and the recovery and purchase of housing stock. The development of Roma social housing policies alternative to equipped villages is therefore also affected by the poor Italian social housing offer and the current housing crisis in Rome.

These factors, together with the economic crisis, are currently creating a stalemate of public expenditure for Roma housing policies in Rome. For instance, in January 2013, the City of Rome stipulated that people of any nationality suffering from severe housing deprivation would be given priority in the allocation of public housing. Yet, on 9 September 2013, the President of the Security Commission of Rome, Fabrizio Santori, declared on his website that the Roma would not be prioritised in this period of strong economic crisis, because it would be unfair to Italian Roman citizens and could potentially ignite social conflicts. This shows how the increased competition over scarce welfare resources affects the inclusion of the Roma that are already perceived as an exceptional and favoured category among other migrants and minorities.

According to interviews, grievances about public spending on Roma integration policies do not come only from Italian politicians and voters. An interviewee who worked in a primary school as a support teacher for Roma students reported that, after the crisis, Italian parents increasingly complained about free school buses for Roma children, but at the same time Roma spokespersons maintain that EU funding for their integration goes mainly to NGOs without actually reaching their communities. Moreover, social cooperatives that work in equipped villages and reception centres are protesting against the cuts in defence of the rights of their employees and of the Roma who risk being left without support. The economic crisis in this situation seems to freeze every possibility of change: on the one hand, spending more on the Roma is impossible because of the budget deficit and cuts, and even if it were possible, it would be highly unpopular; on the other hand, spending less—although almost unavoidable—is highly contested by both NGOs that have a commercial contract with the City of Rome and those that criticise the way public funding is spent. Thus, nationally harsh austerity measures have led to the erosion of the welfare state disproportionately impacting poor people, and risking increasing urban unrest, a rise in populist parties and xenophobic attitudes. In Rome, where this is compounded by a large local public debt and considerable expenses on Roma policies on which different actors depend, how is the proposal to dismantle Roma equipped villages and new Roma housing policies framed and justified?

### **Framing Roma access to housing in times of crisis: two ways of coping with austerity**

Crises do not only exacerbate social conflicts but can also constitute a possibility to question and re-define current divisions and representations (Clarke and Newman 2012; Levitas 2012; McFarlane 2012), hence the current austerity policies and discourses can

also create the conditions to reshape the inclusion of the Roma. In Italy, the crisis provides new opportunities to frame the integration of the Roma: in the first case, austerity is used as a tool to criticise the current policy intervention and expenditure and to propose the dismantling of equipped villages as a cheaper alternative; in the second, the crisis and austerity come to constitute the common ground for different categories that unite to fight against a larger housing crisis. In the analysis below, I draw on the classification presented in the National Integration Strategy that mainly identifies three types of ‘stakeholders relating to civil society’ (UNAR 2012, 35) referring to Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC). These are: RSC associations, that is, those ‘primarily or exclusively composed [of RSC people]’ (48); third sector organisations operating in the RSC social inclusion process; human rights NGOs, that is, those that ‘have a documented experience in the promotion and protection of the rights [of RCS people]’ (48). To these I add social movements that mobilise on Roma issues, and that in Rome are becoming increasingly important actors in the definition of the policies vis-à-vis the Roma.

### **Austerity I: dismantling equipped villages to save money**

Pro-Roma NGOs are aware of the fact that the economic crisis creates new obstacles to Roma integration policies. Several interviewees pointed out that the economic crisis makes it harder for both pro-Roma NGOs and institutional actors to address the issue of Roma integration, as it might be highly unpopular. Furthermore, there are different actors that might disagree with a change in Roma housing policies, most importantly some of the social cooperatives working in the equipped villages. As reported by a member of Associazione 21 Luglio, for example:

‘... the Nomad Plan is a company that makes more than twenty millions of Euros

and with more than 450 employees, and it is really hard to shut down a company that employs 450 people in times of crisis. Nobody has the courage to do such thing, therefore nomad camps are still there.' (Adriano, November 2013)<sup>5</sup>

Reports by the Associazione 21 Luglio (2012, 2014b) show that there are several cooperatives that have a contract with the City of Rome to provide services in the equipped villages. For them the system of equipped villages constitutes an important source of revenue and this might lead to them opposing the dismantling of the equipped villages. For this reason some pro-Roma associations openly refuse to do paid work in equipped villages and to receive money from the local administration in order to remain more independent (such as Associazione 21 Luglio or Popica). Other associations that work in equipped villages in agreement with the City of Rome, such as Casa dei Diritti Sociali, adopted the strategy of curtailing their intake by cutting activities that might reduce the autonomy of the families living in these villages, such as the schooling of children that parents can take care of without the need of mediators.

Some pro-Roma advocacy groups and think tanks also publish reports in which they highlight how much the system of Roma equipped villages costs. For instance, the associations Berenice, Compare, Lunaria and OsservAzione last year published a report entitled *Segregare costa* [The Costs of Segregation], focused on the public funding of the Roma villages in the cities of Milan, Naples and Rome (Berenice et al. 2013). Recently, Associazione 21 Luglio (2014b) published a report entitled *Campi Nomadi S.p.a.* [Nomad Camps Ltd] on the equipped villages of the City of Rome. These reports show that up to two-thirds of the public funding for equipped villages is used for their management (i.e. waste collection, water and electricity, maintenance costs) and security (i.e. internal surveillance), while only the remainder goes to integration services, such as school support

(Associazione 21 Luglio 2014b). This constitutes a strategy to raise awareness on how a large amount of public funding has been spent on ineffective policies. The crisis makes the issue of public expenditure more sensitive, therefore, it is used as a time to suggest the idea that investing in more effective and integrating policies does not necessarily imply spending more, but could even save money.

These associations suggest a set of alternatives to the special social housing programme of equipped villages, for instance, slum upgrading programmes, self-build projects, recovery of disused buildings for co-housing of larger families, small areas for groups of a few families, support for renting on the private housing market, as well as access to public housing for smaller families. Some of these solutions have been already developed in some Italian cities (such as recovery projects in Messina and self-build experiences in Padua) and studies have shown that the costs of these projects are less than one-third of the costs of equipped villages in Rome (Associazione 21 Luglio 2014b). In 2008, the association Stalker,<sup>6</sup> in collaboration with Roma Tre University, developed a self-build project in the informal settlement Casilino 900 in Rome where the architects of this association helped the Roma to build a 70 m<sup>2</sup> house for the same costs as the 18 m<sup>2</sup> Portakabins provided in equipped villages (Muzzonigro 2011).<sup>7</sup> With this project Stalker showed that, for the same amount of money, it is possible to build a house that can accommodate a bigger family, and also to foster the participation of the communities.

However, since the reduction of public funding and dismantling of equipped villages would also imply a loss of jobs for people employed in this sector, Associazione 21 Luglio signed a letter with Arci Solidarietà calling for the dismantling of the Roma equipped villages, while at the same time asking for protection of the people working in these villages (Associazione 21 Luglio 2013). This open letter outlines the main

problems of the equipped villages system and illustrates their suggestions for changing the situation. These include the prioritising of social inclusion, the developing of social housing alternatives (such as those mentioned earlier), campaigning against anti-Roma stereotypes and the demand to offer the workers of NGOs working in equipped villages employment in new social inclusion programmes. This document shows for the first time how the demand to dismantle the system of equipped villages considers also the protection of the workers of this sector. However, the local administration has not answered this letter yet.

### **Austerity II, or its productive effect: new solidarities towards participation**

The current politics of austerity also has a moral component that calls for shared sacrifice and collective obligation (Clarke and Newman 2012). Although this discourse is often used to justify cuts to welfare, it remains open to contestation and new articulations (Levitas 2012). For example, in Italy some associations suggest using the notion of solidarity invoked by austerity discourse to include the Roma and to show that they are willing to help and contribute to the economic recovery of the country, as stated by a member of a Roma NGO in Rome:

‘We want Italy to understand that there is a positive resource: the Romani community, who is ready to help also in this moment of crisis.’ (Simone, November 2013)

This strategy aims to counter the stereotype of the Roma that do not want to work and that mainly make a living through criminal activities. For this reason there are associations that promote campaigns against stereotypes and others that mainly focus on labour integration in order to show that the Roma actually want to contribute to the national economy. The solidarity invoked to face the economic crisis is in this case used

to try to include the Roma in this imagined supportive community. However, this is not the only form of solidarity mobilised for the inclusion of the Roma.

The economic crisis is also used as a positive frame to reshape the relation between different categories that unite forming a new collective subjectivity based on housing condition, that of being evicted or left homeless. This also constitutes a chance to unite categories that are often opposite, namely, the Italian working class, economic migrants and Roma people. These new solidarities emerge mainly in squats where Roma, Italians and other migrants live together with the support of pro-Roma associations, such as Popica<sup>8</sup> and Stalker, and social movements fighting for the housing rights of homeless and evicted people and against the lack of affordable housing (such as BPM, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and RAM, Resistenza Abitativa Metropolitana). By joining these social movements, the Roma become an active part of the fight for housing rights, hence bypassing the phase of temporary relocation to equipped villages that eventually risks becoming permanent. These associations and movements consider the Roma as part of the lumpenproletariat and see the ethnicisation of their poverty as a way to divert the attention from the most important problem that these communities face, that is, exclusion from the housing and labour markets.

The number of political squats involving Romani families and groups is increasing in Rome.<sup>9</sup> The first of these occupations was Metropolitiz, set up in an abandoned factory in 2009 by the BPM group with the help of Popica. In the squat there were already Italians and migrants, while a group of 150 Roma joined the occupation in 2011 after being evicted from the settlement Casilino 700 located on the eastern periphery of the city and not too far from the occupied factory. The BPM group set up other smaller squats engaging Romani groups, and in 2013 two new squats were set up in Tiburtina Street by the RAM group in two abandoned buildings. In the first RAM squat, set



up in June 2013, there are Roma living together with other migrants, while in the second (occupied in September 2013) there is only one Romani community evicted from an informal settlement. In these examples the Roma started fighting together with other migrants and Italians as part of a new political subject not based on their ethnicity, but based on their socio-economic status. This means that they are no longer seen by the local administration as part of the category of nomads/Roma but as belonging to the category of squatters, which implies dealing with a different department, that is, the Department of Housing Policies instead of the Department of Social Services that manages the Roma housing services, equipped villages included.

This shift is particularly relevant since, while as Roma they are offered relocation to Roma-only housing solutions, as squatters they are offered relocation to either public housing or other emergency housing solutions (non-Roma only). For example, Metropolis has been included in the list of occupied buildings mentioned in Resolution No. 206 (Comune di Roma 2007). This resolution was approved in 2007 and provides that 15% of available public housing should go to the occupants of squats for housing rights, therefore the Roma of Metropolis too. The Roma of Metropolis have been formally entitled to social housing in the case of eviction, which is highly unlikely if they apply individually, as I illustrated earlier. By joining Metropolis on the basis of a shared socio-economic condition exacerbated by the economic crisis, the Roma managed to bypass the housing solution of equipped villages and formally gained access to public housing.

The experiences of these squats are particularly important because they highlight the mobilisation capacity of the Roma, that often present—at least in Western Europe—low electoral and political participation (Sigona 2009). On the contrary, in this case, the Roma are taking an active role in political participation, without the support of institutional initiatives, as occurred in Milan

during a mobilisation in a squat following the eviction from an informal settlement in the early 2000s (Vitale and Boschetti 2011). While the active participation of the Roma faded away after the experience of the Milan squat (Vitale and Boschetti 2011), this new experience of mobilisation in Rome, strengthened by the new alliances emerging in the context of crisis, could contribute to the Roma becoming the subject of change rather than the object of policies or NGO initiatives (the latter is criticised for silencing the Roma voice [Trehan 2009]).

Furthermore, the example of the Roma in Metropolis, together with other squats organised by the BPM and RAM groups, teaches mainly two important lessons, one about the effects of crises, and the other about the effects of Roma mobilisation for housing rights through class-based solidarity rather than ethnicity. Crises, as mentioned before, have an ambivalent character: they can exacerbate social conflicts, they can produce new cleavages, but they can also create the conditions for new forms of solidarity and productive contestations of previous divisions. The second lesson is about the possibility of changing the Roma housing situation by organising mobilisations on the basis of their socio-economic status rather than their ethnic identity. In a way, this supports Fanon's ([1965] 2005) idea of the revolutionary potential of the lumpen-proletariat as opposed to Marx's, as those that are revolting and creating new solidarities during the crisis are not Roma and Travellers in general, but the most oppressed among them. This aspect also opens the question of the extent to which the ethnic definitions employed by pro-Roma NGOs and international institutions, such as the COE or the OSF, really work for their integration, mainly in times of economic crisis.

## Conclusion

The recent economic crisis and austerity politics create new obstacles to the integration of

the Roma, for social tensions and unrest tend to exacerbate and populist parties and anti-immigration attitudes tend to increase. These effects are even sharper in the case of the Roma that have been historically subject to stigmatisation and criminalisation, depicted as untrustworthy, deviant and more recently as scroungers. In a time of economic crisis they are therefore more likely to be blamed for weighing on citizens' shoulders. Yet, the pro-Roma NGOs and social movements considered in this paper have shown how an obstacle can be turned into a resource for action, how the crisis has not one, but many different effects, not only constraining but also enabling and productive. Although this has been only a preliminary study into the subject, I would like to conclude by summarising the main effects of post-crisis austerity on the promotion of Roma access to housing and to suggest some of the aspects that could account for these different outcomes.

The first effect is a stalemate of the situation. Because of the presence of many actors that rely on public funding for Roma-related policies, the shrinking of public resources, the cuts to public expenditure and the rising unemployment are producing a paralysis of the situation. NGOs that take an active part in this process are mainly those that work in equipped villages in agreement with the City of Rome, and are mostly composed of non-Roma people. This effect also tends to be supported by residents of either equipped villages or Roma reception centres, and their representatives that fear that a reduction of funding might imply becoming homeless.

The second one is an exacerbation of discriminatory discourses: in times of economic recessions and high unemployment, attitudes to migrants and minorities worsen and far-right parties might increase their power. This effect seems to be particularly strong in the case of actors that frame the Roma in ethnic terms, that is, that tend to conceive the Roma as a culturally deviant group. To stress the ethnic difference of the Roma

rather than their socio-economic position might result in their exclusion from national narratives, as already pointed out by Vermeersch (2012). As a result, in times of crisis, the ethnicisation of the poverty of Roma groups might reinforce their exclusion.

Third, austerity also calls into question the accountability of public authorities, namely, the local administration is accused of being responsible for the excessive expenditure on ineffective Roma equipped villages. This effect emerges mainly among pro-Roma NGOs that decide not to work in the equipped villages in agreement with the City of Rome, and that include Roma among their members. These NGOs are more critical of the ways the Roman municipality invests money in Roma integration policies, and are also less affected by the change in the use of public funding. Thus, in times of crisis they might develop new strategies to promote Roma access to housing rather than opposing change.

The last effect I observed has been the emergence of new solidarities including the Roma. This strategy is mainly adopted by NGOs that do not work in equipped villages, and by left social movements. These NGOs and movements mainly frame the Roma exclusion in terms of socio-economic status rather than through their ethnic identity, and they primarily address the Roma housing situation rather than the protection of their human rights. The Roma that take part in these mobilisations most often come from evicted informal settlements, while residents of equipped villages rarely leave the villages to join these movements. Almost paradoxically, this aspect that leads to the formation of new solidarities with other non-Roma categories also constitutes an element of non-solidarity between the Roma.

From these aspects I identified some variables that might account for the differences in the way post-crisis austerity politics affects the promotion of Roma housing integration. The first is about the extent to which local NGOs exclusively rely on local public funding: NGOs that receive less money



from the local administration seem to be more likely to develop new strategies for promoting alternatives to current segregating Roma housing policies in times of crisis. The second variable regards the Roma as active participants in these strategies: apparently, it is Roma that live in informal settlements under threat of eviction that join social movements and engage with other categories beyond ethnicity. The third aspect is about the use of an ethnic framework: actors that frame the Roma claims mainly in ethnic terms tend to reinforce their exclusion, while those that stress their socio-economic position as similar to other categories tend to open up spaces for new creative solidarities. This is important as it highlights how the ethnicisation of the Roma category actually hides the most prominent dimension of their marginalisation and source of stigmatisation, which is their exclusion/inclusion from economic modes of production. This could also support the idea that giving priority to the issue of exclusion from the labour market—both in terms of policymaking and rights advocacy—might be an effective way to tackle the other forms of Roma marginalisation, such as exclusion from housing, education and health. In conclusion, in order to evaluate the effects of austerity politics, it is not enough to describe what these are, but we also need to understand the conditions that contribute to their emergence, the different kinds of alliance and new forms of solidarity they create, and what changes these might produce.

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### Notes

- 1 This housing policy does not have an official name, and it is often referred to as gypsy camps (UNAR 2012), authorised camps (Amnesty International 2013) or just camps. However, in this paper I employ the expression equipped villages, English translation of Italian *villaggi attrezzati*, because this is the name adopted in some of the official documents of the City of Rome. Furthermore, this expression is more neutral than the term camp, which is often charged with judgmental meaning by those who have anti-Roma attitudes and those that criticise this housing policy.
- 2 At policy level the two categories of Roma and nomads are often merged together and considered as synonyms. This implies that regional laws, decrees, local ordinances and policy measures aimed at nomads are applied to Romani groups. Pro-Roma NGOs condemn the use of the term nomads to refer to Roma and Travellers as it conveys the wrong idea that these groups are nomads, while the majority of the Roma and Travellers are actually sedentary. In addition, the 2013 National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Communities acknowledges this point and stresses the importance not to refer to the Romani groups as nomads.
- 3 Opera Nomadi is a nationwide Christian-based non-profit organisation in favour of the integration of the Roma minority. Opera Nomadi has a contract with the City of Rome for providing school and children support services in some of the equipped villages.
- 4 Social housing policies broadly consist of a set of measures aiming to provide affordable housing to

poorer or marginalised categories. These include rent supplements, housing subsidies, public housing and also special housing programmes for marginalised categories, such as emergency accommodation for homeless people, refugees and also the equipped villages for the Roma discussed in this paper.

- 5 The names of the interviewees reported in this paper have been changed to protect their anonymity.
- 6 Stalker is an association composed of a group of artists and architects that work on urban marginality. They also worked in Romani informal settlements with activities of refurbishment and constructions of structures aiming to directly engage the population of these settlements.
- 7 This self-build project was called Savorengo Ker (i.e. Everyone's House in Romani language). The house was destroyed in an arson attack in December 2012 for which the perpetrators are still unknown.
- 8 Popica is a non-profit organisation working in Italy (in Rome) and in Romania on issues such as child protection, social exclusion and homelessness. Popica does not work in equipped villages and runs activities mainly with Romanian Roma communities living in informal settlements.
- 9 For a classification of squatting, see Pruijt (2013).

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